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The Intersection of Racist and Homophobic Bullying in Adult and Higher Education: An Introduction of the Three Types of Bullying

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Keywords: adult bullying, adult higher education, racism, homophobia

Abstract: This paper addresses the author's recent narrative study on adult bullying in higher education in terms of the intersection of racism, sexism, and homophobia. This paper specifically examines and provides several narratives from gay male faculty of color on three types of bullying that impacted their academic life and citizenship.

Bullying has become a critical social problem in contemporary society. Researchers and scholars have identified and agreed that bullying physically and psychologically damages both individuals and groups (Garbarino & deLara, 2002). At an individual level, victims of bullying are more likely to suffer from psychological symptoms such as depression, nervousness, and stress (Randall, 2001). At a group level, bullying impacts an organization by creating a hostile environment where interpersonal conflicts and violence frequently occur and can lead to organizational malfunctioning hence decreased productivity (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Higher education is typically bureaucratic and as such, the positions there become a source of power in a hegemonic system in which race, gender, and sexual orientation have been covered and cloaked and have been treated as if they are not significant. In this way, bullying is allowed to happen in the higher education context where adults and adolescents comele. Higher education still perpetuates a sociocultural power imbalance wherein bullying is institutionally encouraged as a way to discriminate and marginalize gay people of color (Misawa, 2007). If higher education is to follow through on creating environments conducive to all students, faculty, and staff, then focus must be shifted to examine how bullying impacts teaching, learning, and institutional policies in higher education.

This paper, which is based on the author's recent study (Misawa, 2009), addresses the intersection of racist and homophobic adult bullying in higher education and examines how adult bullying influences the lives of gay male faculty of color in higher education. It particularly focuses on the exploration and examination of gay male faculty of color's negative experiences and their experiences of being victims of adult bullying related to the intersection of racism and homophobia in higher education.

Methodology

For this study, the qualitative research approach of narrative inquiry was implemented. Nineteen gay male faculty members of color were interviewed via telephone for more than one hour each. The research interview elicited information from the participants about their academic experiences as gay men of color. Since the research topic was personal and emotional, the interviews were semi-structured—a mix of more- and less-structured questions (Polkinghorne, 1998). Interview questions were designed to be open-ended so that the participants could communicate their experiences freely. Questions asked of the subjects in this study related to demographics and experiences both in classrooms and on campuses. All of the interviews were

recorded and transcribed. All of the transcribed interviews were organized by themes and were closely examined. The names used to describe participants are pseudonyms.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed three main themes, one of which will be discussed below: Managing Anti-Reciprocal Relations with Power Holders. This theme represents various relationships and interactions between each of the gay male faculty of color and others in higher education such as administrators, deans, chairs, colleagues, and students to show how positionality affected the experiences of each of the gay male faculty of color in higher education.

This theme indicated that bullying manifested itself in three ways: a) Positional Bullying, which is a type of bullying engaged in by a person in a position of power; b) Counter-Positional Bullying which is a type of bullying engaged in by a person who is in a position of less power but whose positionality empowers them to bully a person disenfranchised by their race, gender, or sexual orientation; and c) Unintentional Conspirative Positional Bullying which is a type of bullying engaged in simultaneously and collaboratively by a group of at least two people who are in superior and subordinate positions of power respectively in terms of their identities as race, gender, or sexual orientation, which enables them to bully a disenfranchised person by means of their race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Examples of Positional Bullying

Professor Fredric Smith, an African American gay male faculty member, was an assistant professor who was denied tenure. He analyzed his experience and felt that this was a setup because he thought that everything had been going well and he had been receiving excellent reviews while on the tenure-track at his institution. Not even one person had told him that he needed more research time to obtain tenure. Reflecting on the experience, Professor Smith believed that his positionality influenced his tenure. In particular, race was likely a prominent factor in the denial of his tenure. He said that he had observed how other People of Color were treated in the department at his current institution, and that he had witnessed racism in the department and seen how race was strategically utilized to dismiss People of Color during the tenure process. This is what he had to say about it:

I think more race than anything [affected my tenure denial] because there were only four African American professors here in my department. So, the dean had fired one of them, denied me tenure, gave my supervisor [who is African American] a limited contract. So, my supervisor only got a two-year contract as our division head. Normally, most people get a four-year contract. So, it seems like there's some racism. Only because there's just a few of us now, three of us are almost out to the door. So, I think that's a big thing.

According to Professor Davis, being a gay male faculty of color in higher education had not been easy for him. With very few African Americans on campus at his previous institution, Professor Davis had been aware of discrimination that was going on behind his back, and he sort of knew how his race and sexual orientation could one day be obstacles in his career as a gay male faculty of color at the institution:

Well, my first couple of years there, I always felt like there was a target on my back, and I really, I was really having a hard time finding out specifically why. I knew that I was

one of very very few African Americans on campus on faculty, and then also being gay....I know that my performance was never given the same weight as the other people's performance, when I would publish a major piece,...get teaching awards, those were always diminished and minimized, and my contributions were devalued.

Positional bullying also appeared when gay male faculty of color in this study tried to collaborate with their colleagues and instead found that race and sexual orientation became significant factors. Professor Shane Edwards, an African American associate professor and associate dean, talked about how a group of people with the same identity as his did not really embrace him as a member of their group. He said that White gay male professors were unsupportive, and they seemed to be trying to make him fail:

When it comes to grant dollars, I mean I feel like I had the most resistance from other gay folks. I feel the least supported by White gay men in an academic environment. I feel like the least support I get is because they are pretty devious. We happened to cover a lot of common ground in terms of research. I have a few examples where they (White gay male tenured full professors) cited me in their literature, and then turned around and done something that's clearly not to my advantage. I can also think of an example where I got excluded from a grant by another White gay male researcher who had every opportunity to support my scholarship, but did not.

Professor Edward Turner, an African American associate professor, also talked about how White gay male professors were not inclusive:

I have not found too many of White gay male professors to be really kind of people who are open and who don't have racial prejudices. I see so many of them don't have to think about racial aspect. They are already privileged because they are White people.... I think the other thing has been hurtful for me is being excluded from the White gay professor population. I've been excluded from them because they don't want to include race. They still have racial attitudes, negative racial attitudes. When they do want to be with you or if they date you, and your relationship becomes sexual, they only deal with you through their sexual fantasy. They see you as a sexualized person.

Examples of Counter-Positional Bullying

Professor Melvin Kelly, a Black associate professor, had experienced being questioned by a student as to whether he was knowledgeable about the content that he was teaching. From his experiences, such a thing was not uncommon for him; the same sort of negativities from his students had appeared over and over during his academic career:

You know, there are a lot of other things happened in my career, but they are basically the same sort of things where either students are permitted to be disrespectful. Here is an example. Well, I was teaching one class, an introductory class, the first year class. We were talking about jurisprudential theory. So, one of the theories we were talking about was the law of economics. So, I was pointing out some of the analytical problems with the standard neoclassical theory. So, after the class, one of the students wrote an email to the class saying that he needed to correct some of the things that I had said about economic theory

because I was wrong. So, he made this long list of things that I had said were wrong. So, I responded to the email and pointed out why I was taking those positions and positions that he was taking might be consistent with what he learned in Microeconomics 101. When you study of schools of economics, you have other perspectives and see things differently. So the students were upset by that because I said that I was saying that, that's what they said that I knew more than they did. That was a problem.

When some students who were White and heterosexual perceived that their gay male professors of color knew content or material that the students themselves did not know, they seemed to automatically start questioning how a minority could attain such knowledge, like they did with Professor Kelly and others in this study, gay male faculty members of color who commonly had his own knowledge questioned and challenged by students as their professor.

Professor Wesley Vasquez, a Latino assistant professor, talked about student evaluations where his sexual orientation was a factor used in degrading him publicly as a professor:

It's not uncommon in my student evaluations to see the word, fagot. That word has come up many times for students have taken the opportunities to say, "He is too much of a fagot." Something like that. I don't think it happens to straight people. They [student evaluations and students] make me angry, but I don't feel hurt by them anymore because I have a very little respect for student evaluations.

Gay male faculty members of color also reported that their evaluations from students were often laden with racist remarks or racial stereotypes. Professor Oscar Martin, a Black associate professor, described an experience where he had received student evaluations from predominantly White female students:

So, when they encountered me as a professor, they're so used to these negative thoughts about who they think of young of color are that they think I can fit them. And I frighten them. They are uncomfortable because a lot of time they just never encountered somebody like me, a Black male professor. So, they need to deal with their own issues of ageism, sexism, and racism. And it's one thing that you know you have to deal with it, and there is another thing to have somebody in front of you on a daily basis that makes you have to deal with it. So, you know, I would get teaching comments back like you know, "Dr, Martin is brilliant and well versed in his subject. But he comes with this cocky and elegant. And, he is intimidating." Which remind you, if you realize, it has nothing to do with my teaching. If the teaching evaluation is actually supposed to be about teaching, then why are you so concerned about who you perceive me to be?

Unintentional Conspirative Positional Bullying

Gay male faculty of color end up having to negotiate power relationships within an academic hierarchy (LaSala, Jenkins, Sheeler, & Fredricksen-Goldsen, 2008), and in doing so they often encounter situations where they are caught in between people who are organizationally and socioculturally more privileged and people who are organizationally and socioculturally less privileged, and the gay male faculty of color in this study were experiencing bullying from both sides. For example, Professor David Green, an African American assistant professor, experienced unintentional conspirative positional bullying where his credibility as a

professor was diminished through conspirative interactions between his chair and his student, and it was believed to be because of his race:

This is also related to being a gay male faculty of color. I was doing an independent study for an African American student on African American literature.... She was a good student. But, the student wanted to try to get into the honors project. And, I didn't think that that student was strong enough to do the honors project. And, I told my chair that. The student went to my chair (a White female African American Literature professor), and she tried to get my chair to get me to do it. And, I had a very difficult meeting with my chair over this scenario because I am a scholar of African American Literature, and I felt that I should be able to make the assessment of her. I should go ahead with the honors project with the student or not. Not the chair, not the student. I should be able to have that determination. And, I felt that the chair was trying to not enough in a heavy-handed way, but in a kind of gentle way, but in a gentle way that was encouraging me to do it. And, I was adamant and mentioned that she was not strong enough to do the honors project. I thought I enjoyed the independent study with her and that was fine. But, the honors project, it required something more than the student had. And, when the chair, she eventually said, "Okay. You made that call." So, she decided to do the honors project with her. I felt disrespected, actually. And, my judgment wasn't valued there by both the chair and the student. I was kind of ignored.

Professor Green reflected on his experience of being controlled by both his White female chair and his student, and in doing so he expressed how he felt he had been ignored and discounted in the professional assessments from both sides:

Within the academy, you know, people are very smart. People have Ph.D.s. That does not mean that they understand racial dynamics or sexual dynamics. They can be just as racially unaware and sexually naïve or bigoted as anybody else....People here are very well meaning....They are naïveté. Their unawareness is still an impediment to me because they do not fully grasp the significance of what means for me to be here....My colleague, who is chair of the department right now. She teaches African American Literature. But frankly, I think she is a bit naïve and a bit unknowledgeable about what means for me to be here. For instance, [the White female chair] did not seem to understand the gravity of the situation by the independent study.... I had a conversation with her about that when the student went above my head. And, I said to the chair, "I am an African American professor, and she is taking an independent study on African American Literature. And it's the professor who teaches African American Literature says that it is not probably a good idea to turn this into an honor's project. And, the student goes over your head to a White female professor to try to get you to change your mind. That's disrespecting the professor you are working with." And, apparently the chair herself needed me to tell her that. But it did not do any good. She went ahead and did the independent study anyway with the student. So, student's needs were above my needs. And I am a faculty member here. I did not feel validated when my judgment was dismissed.

Discussion and Implications

The narratives from the gay male faculty of color in this study showed that bullying does exist in some places in higher education. In particular, the gay male faculty of color interviewed for this study expressed how their academic citizenship had been undermined through bullying based on racism and homophobia. They reported that they often had encountered negative and hostile experiences on campus from administrators, departmental chairs, colleagues, and students due to bigoted ideas and stereotypes about race and/or sexual orientation. This paper provided some examples of the need for adult educators to make an effort to understand bullying based on positionality so it can be detected and effectively prevented as a form of academic bullying.

There are several practical implications for adult educators. Adult educators could become anti-bullying advocates who conduct professional development on the issue of bullying on campus. There is a need to teach anti-bullying and power dynamics that examine case scenarios such as those uncovered here and a need to set up ground rules that focus on how people should treat others in higher education and in the adult education classroom with respect. Adult educators should spend time defining and discussing ethical and appropriate behaviors in their classes and on campus in order to create more democratic, inclusive and safer educational environment for adults. This study may be a good point of reference for adult educators advocating and teaching anti-bullying education in adulthood.

In conventional education, race and sexual orientation are rarely treated together (McCreedy & Kumashiro, 2006; Misawa, 2010), so adult educators must also focus on teaching diversity and multiculturalism less monolithically by acknowledging that adults often hold combinations of intersecting identities. Particularly important is that they address the intersection of race and sexual orientation when they teach about diverse populations and practice social justice. This study indicated that this group of gay male faculty members of color were bullied by their White and heterosexual administrators, colleagues, and students. Such situations make it imperative for adult educators to create a series of courses and workshops on social justice and bullying that deal specifically with bullying as it applies to the intersection of race, sexual orientation, and other sociocultural identities.

In addition, adult educators must consider how power dynamics and positionality play out in the lives of their adult students and how such things enable bullying to occur at any time in their students' lives. Finally, adult educators can initiate and develop support groups and community projects that deal with issues of power dynamics, positionality, and bullying in higher education for adults.

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